

## AN UNJUST ACCUSATION.

BY ROBERT BARR,

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THERE are houses in London which seem to take upon themselves some of the characteristics of their inmates. Down the steps of a gloomy-looking dwelling you generally see a gloomy-looking man descend, and from the portal of a bright-red brick façade, incrusting with terra-cotta ornaments, there emerges a fashionably dressed young fellow twirling a jaunty cane. The house in which a terrible murder has been committed, usually looks the exact place for such a crime, and ancient maiden ladies live in peaceful semi-detached suburban villas.

In like manner famous club buildings

give forth to the observant public some slight indication of the quality of their collective members. The Athenæum Club looks for all the world like a respectable massive book-case, made last century and closed up. One would expect, were the walls opened out, to see row upon row of stately useful volumes, like encyclopedias, and solid works of reference, strongly bound in sober leather. The Reform and the Carleton, standing together, resemble two distinguished portly statesmen, of opposing politics, it is true, but, nevertheless, great personal friends. The clubs where good dinners are to be had seem to

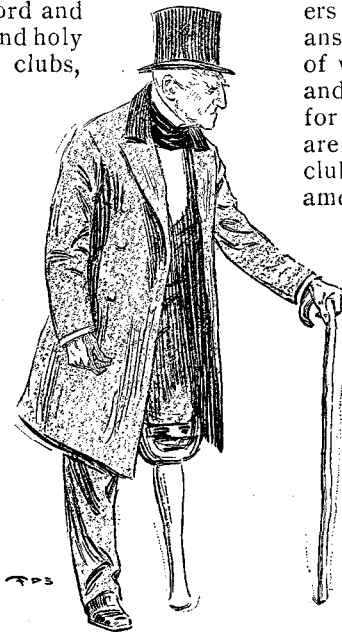
bulge out in front, and you can almost draw up at the somber entrance of the imagine a phantom hand patting a dis- Ironsides, expecting with equal certainty tended waistcoat with supreme satisfaction. to be well paid and found fault with. The university clubs remind one of the architecture of Oxford and Cambridge. A benignant and holy calm pervades the clerical clubs, and the hall porters look like vergers; while there are wide-awake and up-to-date clubs on Piccadilly, frequented by dashing young sparks, and the windows of these clubs almost wink at you as you pass by.

Of no edifice in London can this theory be held more true than of the gloomy, scowling building that houses the Royal Ironside Service Club. It frowns upon the innocent passer-by with an air of irascible superiority, not unmingled with disdain. If you hail a hansom and say to the cabman: "Drive me to the Royal Ironside Service Club," the man will likely lean over towards you and ask with puzzled expression:

"To where, sir?"

But if, instead, you cry in snarly, snappy tones:

"The Growlers!" he will instantly whip along towards St. James's quarter, and



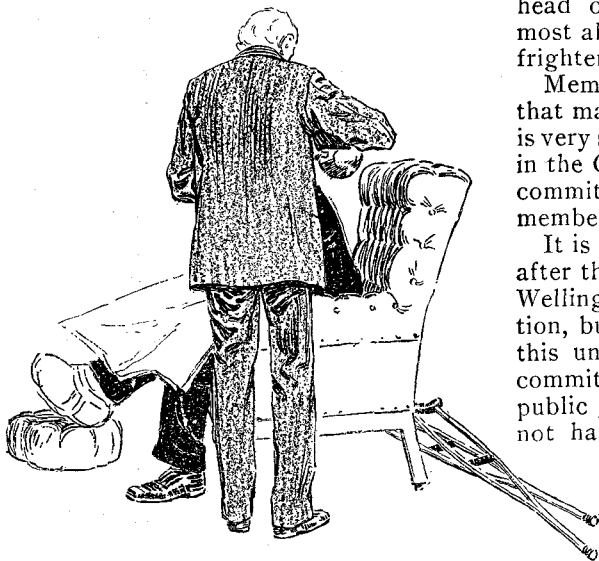
"Like Admiral Sir Stonage Gradburn."

terror to every official of the place within hearing distance. The old man will have nothing to do with modern artificial contrivances in the way of patent legs, and when a well-known firm in London offered him one for nothing if he would but wear it, the angry admiral was only prevented from inflicting personal chastisement upon the head of the firm by the receipt of the most abject apology from that very much frightened individual.

Membership in the Growlers is an honor that may be legitimately aspired to, but it is very seldom attained, for the blackballing in the Growlers is something fearful. The committee seems to resent applications for membership as if they were covert insults.

It is a tradition of the club that, shortly after the battle of Waterloo, the Duke of Wellington was elected without opposition, but members speak apologetically of this unusual unanimity, holding that the committee of the day was carried away by public feeling and that the duke should not have been admitted until he was at least ten years older.

The junior member of the club is Colonel Duxbury, who, being but sixty-five years old, neither expects nor receives the slightest consideration for any views he



"Stop!"

may express within the walls of the club building.

It is not precisely known how this collection of warlike antiques came to select James C. Norton, a person of the comparatively infantile age of forty, to be manager of the club. Some say that his age was not definitely known to the committee at the time he was appointed. Others insist that, although the club dues are high, the finances of the institution got into disorder, and so an alert business man had to be engaged to set everything straight. Outsiders again allege that the club had got so into the habit of grumbling, that at last it thought it had a real grievance, and thus they brought in a new man, putting him over the head of the old steward, who, however, was not dismissed nor reduced in pay, but merely placed in a subordinate position. Scoffers belonging to other clubs, men who were doubtless blackballed at the Growlers, libelously state that the trouble was due to the club whisky, a special Scotch of peculiar excellence. In all other clubs in London, whisky, being a precious fluid, is measured out, and a man gets exactly so much for his threepence or his sixpence, as the case may be. No such custom obtains at the Growlers. When whisky is called for, in the smoking-room, for instance, the ancient servitor, Peters, comes along with the decanter in his hand and pours the exhilarating fluid into a glass until the member who has ordered it says "Stop!" The scoffers hold, probably actuated by jealousy and vain longing, that this habit of unmeasured liquor is enough to bankrupt any club in London.

Peters, whose white head has bent without protest under many fierce complainings poured out upon it by irascible members, is said to be the most expert man in London so far as the decanting of whisky is concerned. The exactitude of his knowledge respecting the temperament and requirements of each member is most admirable. When Sir Stonage Gradburn projects the word "Stop" like a bullet, not another drop of the precious liquid passes the lip of the decanter. When Colonel Duxbury, with the modesty of a youthful member, says "Stop" in quite a different tone of voice, Peters allows about an ounce more of whisky to pour into the glass, and then murmurs with deferential humility:

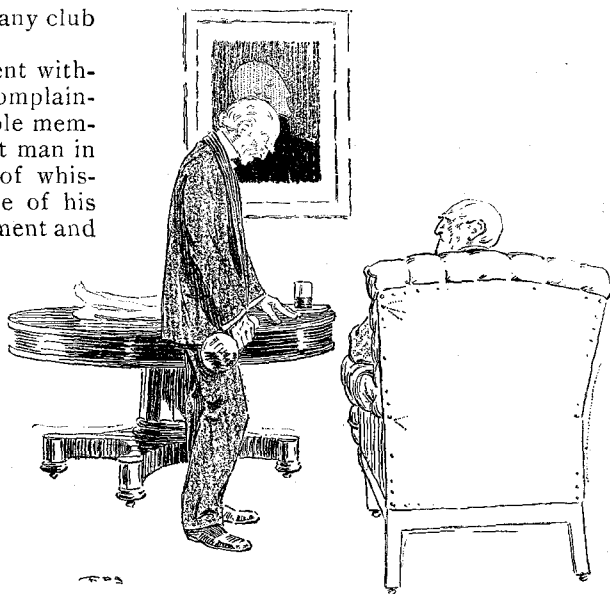
"Oh, I beg your pardon, sir."

Whereupon the colonel replies with chastened severity:

"I will overlook it this time, Peters, but be more careful in future." Whereupon the respectful Peters departs, with the decanter in his hand, saying, "Thank you, sir."

Shortly after the installation of the new manager, Admiral Sir Stonage Gradburn drove up to the Growlers' Club in his brougham, and stumped noisily through the hall, looking straight ahead of him, with a deep frown on his face. His forbidding appearance caused every one within sight to know that the British empire was going on all right, for if the admiral had ever entered with a smile on his face, such an unusual event would have convinced them that at last the peace of Europe had been broken.

The stump of the admiral's wooden leg was lost in the depths of the carpet that covered the smoking-room floor, and the old man seated himself with some caution in one of the deep, comfortable, leather-covered chairs that stood beside a small round table, Peters waiting upon him obsequiously to take his hat and stick, which the admiral never left in the cloak-room, as an ordinary mortal might have done. When the respectful Peters came back, Sir Stonage ordered whisky and the "Times," a mixture of which he was exceedingly fond. Peters hurried away with all the speed that the burden of eighty-six years upon his shoulders would allow, and return-



"Notice to quit, sir!"

ing, gave the admiral the newspaper, while he placed a large glass upon the table and proceeded to pour the whisky into it.

"That will do!" snapped the admiral when a sufficient quantity of "Special" had been poured out. Then an amazing, unheard-of thing happened, that caused the astonished admiral to drop the paper on his knee and transfix the unfortunate Peters with a look that would have made the whole navy quail. The neck of the decanter had actually jingled against the lip of the glass, causing a perceptible quantity of the fluid to flow after the peremptory order to cease pouring had been given.

"What do you mean by that, Peters?" cried the enraged sailor, getting red in the face. "What is the meaning of this carelessness?"

"I am very sorry, Sir Stonage, very sorry, indeed, sir," replied Peters, cringing.

"Sorry! Sorry!" cried the admiral. "Saying you are sorry does not mend a mistake, I would have you know, Peters."

"Indeed, Sir Stonage," faltered Peters, with a gulp in his throat, "I don't know how it could have happened, unless—" he paused, and the admiral, looking up at him, saw there were tears in his eyes. The frown on the brow of Sir Stonage deepened at the sight, and, although he spoke with severity, he nevertheless moderated his tone.

"Well, unless what, Peters?"

"Unless it is because I have notice, sir."

"Notice! Notice of what—a birth, a marriage, a funeral?"

"Notice to quit, sir."

"To quit what, Peters? To quit drinking, to quit gambling, or what? Why don't you speak out? You always *were* a fool, Peters."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," replied Peters, with humility. "I am to leave the service of the club, Sir Stonage."

"Leave the club!" cried the admiral with amazement. "Now, Peters, that simply proves the truth of what I have been saying. You are a fool, and no mis-

take. You may get higher wages, which I doubt; you may better yourself, as the detestable modern phrase goes, but where will you meet such kindly treatment as you receive in this club?"

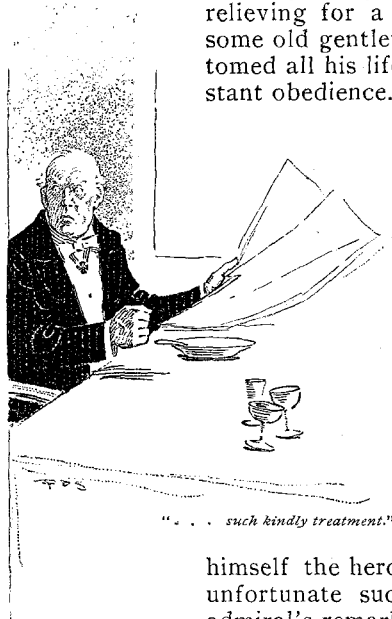
Sir Stonage Gradburn glared at the servant so fiercely that Peters feared for a moment the admiral had forgotten he was not on the quarterdeck and about to order the culprit before him to receive a certain number of lashes; but the eyes of the aged waiter refilled as the last words of the admiral brought to his mind the long procession of years during which he had been stormed at, gruffly ordered about, and blamed for everything that went wrong in the universe. Still, all this had left no permanent mark on Peters's mind, for there had never been a sting in the sometimes petulant complaints flung at him, and he recognized them merely as verbal fireworks playing innocently about his head, relieving for a moment the irritation of some old gentleman who had been accustomed all his life to curt command and instant obedience.

Peters actually believed that the members had invariably been kind to him, and when he thought of how munificently they had remembered him Christmas after Christmas, a lump came into his throat that made articulation difficult. Although the members gave no audible token of their liking for him, nevertheless the old man well knew they would miss him greatly when he was gone, and

Peters often pictured to himself the heroic ordeal that awaited his unfortunate successor in office. So the admiral's remark about the kindness of the club to him touched a tender chord in the heart of the old menial, and the vibration of this chord produced such an agitation within him that it was some moments before he could recover sufficient control over his voice to speak. An impatient "Well, sir?" from the scowling admiral brought him to his senses.

"The new manager has dismissed me, Sir Stonage," replied Peters.

"Dismissed you!" cried the admiral. "What have you been doing, Peters? Not infringing any of the rules of the club, I hope? You have been with us, man and boy, for forty-two years, and should have



"... such kindly treatment."

a reasonable knowledge of our regulations by this time."

Peters had become a servitor of the club at the age of forty-four, and therefore every member looked upon him as having spent his infancy within the walls of the Ironside Service Club.

"Oh, no, Sir Stonage, I have broken none of the rules. I leave the club without a stain on my character," replied Peters, mixing in his reply a phrase that lingered in his mind from the records of the courts. "Mr. Norton dismisses me, sir, because I am too old for further service."

"WHAT!" roared the admiral in a voice of thunder.

Several members in different parts of the room looked up with a shade of annoyance on their countenances. Most of them were deaf, and nothing less than the firing of a cannon in the room would ordinarily have disturbed them, but the admiral's shout of astonishment would have been heard from the deck of the flagship to the most remote vessel in the fleet.

"Too old! Too old!" he continued, "too old for service! Why, you can't be a day more than eighty-six!"

"Eighty-six last March, sir," corroborated Peters, with a sigh.

"This is preposterous!" cried the admiral, with mounting rage. "Go and get my stick at once, Peters. We shall see if servants are to be discharged in the very prime of their usefulness."

Peters shuffled off, and returned from the cloak-room with the stout cane. The admiral took a gulp of his liquor without diluting it, and Peters, handing him his stick, stood by, not daring to make any ostentatious display of assisting Sir Stonage to rise, for the old warrior resented any suggestion that the infirmities natural to his time of life were upon him, or even approaching him. But on this occasion, to Peters's amazement, the admiral, firmly

planting his stick on the right-hand side of the deep chair, thrust his left hand within the linked arm of Peters, and so assisted himself to his feet, or rather to his one foot and wooden stump. Peters followed him with anxious solicitude as he thumped towards the door; then the admiral, apparently regretting his temporary weakness in accepting the arm of his underling, turned savagely upon him, and cried in wrath:

"Don't hover about me in that disgustingly silly way, Peters. You'll be saying I'm an old man next."

"Oh, no, sir," murmured the abject Peters.

The admiral stumped into the committee room of the club, and rang a hand-bell which was upon the table, for no such modern improvement as electricity was anywhere to be found within the club. When the bell was answered the admiral said shortly:

"Send Mr. Norton to me, here."

Mr. Norton came presently in, a clean-cut, smooth-shaven, alert man, with the air of one who knew his business. Nevertheless, Mr. Norton seemed to have the

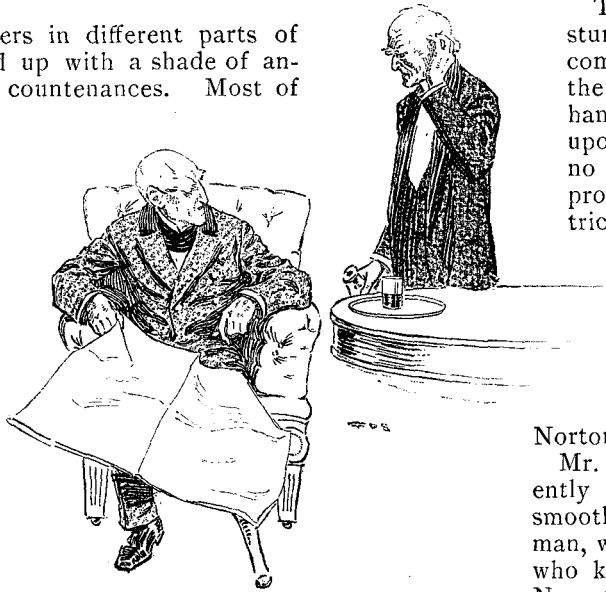
uneasy impression that he was a man out of place. He looked like a smug, well-contented, prosperous grocer, who was trying to assume the dignified air of a Bank of England porter. He bowed to so important a person as the chairman of the House Committee with a deference that was not unmingled with groveling; but the admiral lost no time in preliminaries, jumping at once to the matter that occupied his mind.

"I understand, sir, that you have dismissed Peters."

"Yes, Sir Stonage," replied the manager.

"And I have heard a reason given of such absurdity that I find some difficulty in crediting it; so I now give you a chance to explain. *Why* have you dismissed Peters?"

"On account of hage, Sir Stonage," replied the manager, cowering somewhat, fearing stormy weather ahead.



"Why, you can't be a day more than eighty-six!"



"Don't hover about me in that disgustingly silly way, Peters."

"Hage, sir!" roared the admiral, who for some unexplained reason always felt like striking a man who misplaced his "h's." "I never heard of such a word."

"Peters is hold, sir," said the manager, in his agitation laying special stress on the letter "h" in this sentence.

"Hold! Hold! Are you talking of a ship? Haven't you been taught to speak English? I have asked you what reason you can give for the dismissal of Peters. Will you be so good as to answer me, and use only words to which I am accustomed?"

The badgered manager, remembering that he had a legal contract with the club which that body could not break without giving him, at least, a year's notice or bestowing upon him a year's pay, plucked up courage and answered with some asperity:

"Peters is in his dotage, sir; 'e's hover heifty-six years hold, if 'e's a day, sir."

Lucky for Mr. Norton that the long committee table was between him and the

angry admiral. The latter began stumping down the room, rapping on the table with the knob of his stick as he went, as if he had some thought of assaulting the frightened manager.

"In his dotage at eighty-six!" he exclaimed. "Do you intend to insult the whole club, sir, by such an idiotic remark? How old do you think I am, sir? Do you think I am in my dotage?"

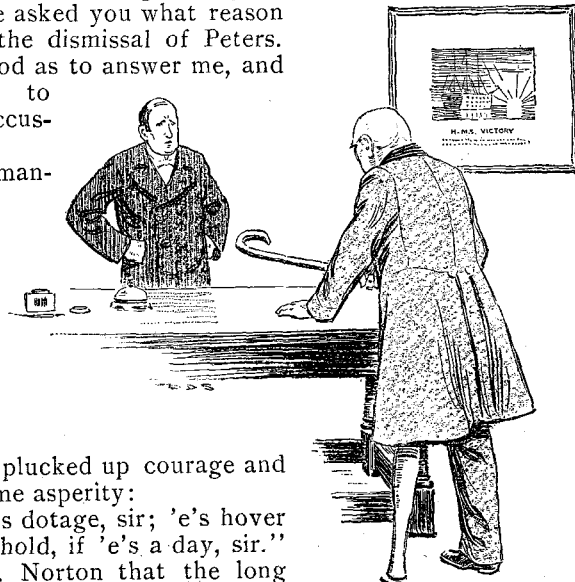
The manager, his grasp on the handle of the door, attempted to assure the approaching admiral that he had no intention whatever of imputing anything to anybody except to old Peters, but he maintained that if he was to reform the club, he must be allowed to make such changes as he thought necessary, without being interfered with. This remark, so far from pouring oil on the troubled waters, added to the exasperation of the admiral.

"Reform! The club has no need of reform."

So the conference ended futilely in the manager going back to his den and the admiral stumping off to call a meeting of the House Committee.

When the venerable relics of a bygone age known as the House Committee assembled in the room set apart for them, their chairman began by explaining that they were called upon to meet a crisis, which it behooved them to deal with in that calm and judicial frame of mind that always characterized their deliberations. Although he admitted that the new manager had succeeded in making him angry, still he would

now treat the case with that equable temper which all who knew him were well aware he possessed. Whereupon he disclosed to them the reason for their being called together, waxing more and more vehement as he continued, his voice becoming louder and louder; and at last he emphasized his remarks by pounding on the table with the head of his stick



"Peters is in his dotage, sir."



"A meeting of the House Committee."

until it seemed likely that he would split the one or break the other.

The members of the committee were unanimously of the opinion that the new manager had cast an aspersion on the club, which was not to be tolerated; so the secretary was requested to write out a check, while the manager was sent for, that he might at once hear the decision of the committee.

The chairman addressed Mr. Norton, beginning in a manner copied somewhat after the deliberative style of our best judges while pronouncing sentence, but ending abruptly, as if the traditions of the bench hampered him.

"Sir, we have considered your case with that tranquillity in which any measure affecting the welfare of our fellow-creatures should be discussed, and, dash me, sir, we've come to the conclusion that we don't want you any longer. Go!"

The chairman at the head of the table scanned malevolently the features of the offending manager, while the different heads of the committee, gray and bald, nodded acquiescence. The manager, seeing the fat was in the fire in any case, now stood up boldly for his rights. He demanded a year's notice.

"You shall have nothing of the kind, sir," replied the admiral. "It is not the custom of the club to give a year's notice."

"I don't care what the custom of the club is," rejoined Norton. "My contract calls for a year's pay if I am dismissed."

"I don't care *that* for your contract,"

cried the admiral, bringing his stick down with a whack on the table. "The club will not change its invariable rule for you or your contract."

"Then I shall sue the club in the law courts. You will 'ear from my solicitor."

Here the admiral, rising, poured forth a stream of language which it is impossible to record, and the members of the committee also rose to their feet, fearing a breach of the peace.

"In heaven's name," whispered the secretary to the manager, "don't anger the admiral further, or there will be trouble. Take the check now and go away without saying any more; then if you don't want the other year's salary, bring it back and give it quietly to our treasurer."

"The hother year's salary!" cried Norton.

"Certainly. It is a habit of the Growlers to pay two years' salary to any one whom they dismiss."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Norton, seizing the check, which he found was for double the amount which he expected. Whereupon he retired quickly to his den, while the committee set itself the task of soothing the righteous anger of the admiral.

And thus it comes about that Peters, who is, as Sir Stonage Gradburn swears, still in the prime of his usefulness, serves whisky in the smoking-room of the Growlers as usual, and the old steward of the club has taken the place so suddenly left vacant by the departure of the energetic Mr. Norton.

